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Anxiety of Reference in *That Deadman Dance.*

By Rohan Wilson

When considering the differences between fiction and history, it seems reasonable to conclude that 'imaginative literature, conceived of as *fiction*' is a somewhat 'privileged form of communication' that 'understands itself as separate from the sphere of the real' (Ellison 6). Fiction, after all, is the realm of the speculative. It is a space where authors are free to invent, describe, and ruminate — even in the complete absence of evidence that these ruminations and descriptions are plausible. Kim Scott's most accomplished novel, *That Deadman Dance,* is a work deeply preoccupied with its position as a fiction and with its relation to history, to the point that it becomes a central focus of the narrative. De Man once insisted that 'readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave', yet in the case of *That Deadman Dance*, which uses the history of the Albany region in Western Australia as a scaffold for narrative, character, and thematic elements, it seems the reader is being specifically invited to confuse the events of the past with the events of the novel (2002: 17). The presence in the text of these historiographic elements, while fundamental to the novel's ethical project, also leads to what Ellison has called 'referential anxiety', or the turn away from the referent towards self-referentiality (6). So do we degrade Scott's fiction by

searching for a historical referent? Or is it his intention to use the ‘referential effects’ of fiction to reveal the tenuous nature of its relationship with the past (Ellison 8)?

There are, it must be noted, a number of reasons why Scott would wish to intermix the empirical, evidenced past with his own speculative fiction. First and foremost of these is the obvious point that history matters. *Deadman* is a text that is engaged with history as a practice. Scott has said before that ‘novels can lead you to history’ and perhaps even ‘do more than that’: they may, in fact, ‘help compensate for what’s not available in the historical material’ (Scott, Leadbetter, Baldassar, Rittler, Laurie 53). But the kind of history that matters to Scott is not one that we traditionally associate with historiography. His novel makes extensive use of sources such as old Noongar stories, the oral traditions of Noongar elders, and the ‘text’ of landscape. Writing in the ‘domain’ of the Noongar oral traditions helped him to ‘think differently’ than he was otherwise ‘allowed by the sort of documents available in the archives’ (Scott et al. 53-4). He built his narrative out of the evidenced past of the colonial settlement at Albany but generated a different view of that material by cladding it with Noongar story and tradition, which in effect operate as kind of Noongar historiography.

Secondly, the referential effects of fiction often serve an ethical purpose; in other words, they anchor the work in the realm of human action and experience.

By limiting the ‘scope of the literary work to the aesthetic realm’ we run the risk of abstracting it from the ‘ethical domain to which it points, or seems to point’ (Ellison 9). A politically charged text such as *Deadman*, one that deals with colonialism, the legacy of white violence, and the loss or breakdown of elements of Aboriginal culture, has a particularly pressing need to retain access to the ethical domain that history represents. In other words, it would be doing the book a disservice to read it in such a way as to ignore the real referents in the historical record to which it points. So while it is certainly possible, and in deconstruction even desirable, to free the fictional text ‘from the constraints of the real referent’ and read as if it was ‘a world of its own’ or a ‘self-created topography’, in this case it would mean shearing the work of a referential foundation that serves an ethical purpose (Ellison 9).

But nevertheless, fiction *does* have the effect of creating its own topography separate from the empirical world. This paper looks at the ways in which the ‘*tension* between imaginary and real referents’ reveals the difficulty Scott faces in linking ‘the verbal texture of the work (the word)’ to ‘the world’ of which it is a part (Ellison 10). Given the often-flimsy nature of referentiality, it should come as no surprise that while *Deadman* endeavours to point beyond itself to the real past, it is not always successful in doing so. The slippage of meaning that figural language causes has the potential to undermine the text’s ability to transparently

signify. Second- and third-degree narratives spin off as unexpected and unpredictable meanings grow out of the complexities of the text. Signification can suddenly come to a halt as these meta-narratives develop and allegorical meanings become of primary significance. To avoid this, the author will take steps to ensure that the text is read in specific ways, and in specific contexts. In *Deadman*, these steps include the use of the author's note to clarify historical sources, and the use of known, recognisable historical events and situations.

But even steps as carefully taken as these can never ensure that the events of the novel point to one, and only one, real referent. In particular, with each repetition of the scene of writing in *Deadman*, the slippage between figure and referent that occurs with metaphor begins to supplant the literal reading. The text splits, and a sequence of elaborate substitutions are enacted. In effect, the text carries on a simultaneous meta-narrative, or an allegory, of its own referential anxiety. It displays what Paul de Man would have called deconstructive tension, and is, therefore, 'suspiciously text-productive', in this case in ways that generate allegory (1979: 200). The allegorical narrative that spins off from the literal historical elements undermines any attempt to read the text in naive or transparent way, instead demonstrating how the 'problematics of figural language' often render texts opaque (de Man 1979: 188).

Commonly, an author's note is used as a way to delineate the documented past, or the real referents, from the more overtly fictional elements, or the imagined referents. Authors are generally attempting fence off their fiction from the body of historiography on which they draw, and the author's note provides a scope for the listing of historical sources, the clarification of where the narrative departs from the sources, and the acknowledgement of previous research. Given that the intercourse between novel and source notes is clearly 'complicated, vital, and productive', it makes sense that reading the author's note might change the way we read the novel (Westerman 369-70). In fact, it also stands to reason that the author's note might 'produce and perform a text's concern about how we do and should tell history' (Westerman 369-70).

This is something like the case we find in *Deadman*. Scott sets up various resonances between the material in the author's note and the text itself. The speaker in the author's note (and whether we take that to be Kim Scott or a Kim Scott-like character is another point of anxiety) insists that the correct term to use to describe the connection the text shares with its historiographic source material is 'inspire', because 'rather than write an account of historical events' the speaker/author 'wanted to build a story from [Noongar] confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms' (398). There is a sense in which 'inspire' captures the tension that the text displays; the desire, that

is, for the authority of the historiographic mode of rhetoric, while at the same time giving acknowledgement that any hope of certainty of meaning is denied by irony, metaphor, and allegory. It is strong indication of the deconstructive tension at the heart of the novel.

The long list of historical sources that occupies most of the author's note is of particular significance when considering this tension. These include 'Neville Green's *Nyungar — The People: Aboriginal Customs in the southwest of Australia*', 'Tiffany Shellam's *Shaking Hands on the Fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George Sound*', and 'Martin Gibb's *The Historical Archaeology of Shore Based Whaling in WA 1836-1879*' (Scott 398). While of course as a fiction *Deadman* is not making any overt claims to historiographic truth, the effect of listing these titles is to verify the referential status of the language of the novel, and to invoke the authority of historical research. This is not a pure fiction, the note says, but a fiction situated within a framework of historical fact. The novel is "'inspired" by history' and is therefore entitled to be read as literal in its representation of the past, so that the events in the novel have a real referent beyond the limits of the text to which the text points (Scott 203).

The speaker in the note here begins to create a predicament for the reader. The status of the language in the text, the possibility that it can refer to something extra-textual, in particular to a past event, is suggested as being much more

concrete than it might otherwise appear. The relationship between the author and the reader is established as one based on an ethical contract, an understanding that the author is representing the past as it was, and not misrepresenting the facts as historians understand them. The inference is that we, the readers, can read in a literal way the myriad references to the settlement of King George Town and the early days of contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people along the coast, safe in the knowledge that there were such events and such times. The rhetorical mode of the text is, in this regard, a literalist one.

Yet, things begin to change when we realise that the novel is discussing ways in which its ethical contract can be made and unmade. It was always the case that texts are made

> Intelligible by a preordained agreement as to their referential authority; this agreement however is merely contractual, never constitutive. It can be broken at all times and every piece of writing can be questioned as to its rhetorical mode (de Man 1979: 204).

What the author's note reveals is the manoeuvring that is taking place as the text strives for a rhetorical position from which to convince us of its truth, ‘if we understand by truth the possibility of referential verification’ (de Man 1979: 204). In order to attain referential verification, the possibility of a literal reading must be encouraged. The author's note performs exactly this task, promoting the

preordained agreement and reassuring the reader that its representations are to be trusted. It provides structural reinforcement for a naive reading of the text.

The prologue to the novel begins the work of undoing that trust. We meet Bobby Wabalanginy sitting on a headland and watching for whales to rise, and while he waits he works with a piece of chalk to make words on a slate. It is a 'complexly figured scene in the diegesis of imagined frontier settlement, dramatizing as it does an ephemeral moment in the meeting of an oral and a literate culture' (Mead 148).

> Kaya. Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn't help but smile. Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ hello or yes that way! Roze a wail… Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages (Scott 1).

Bobby uses English to write in his own language and, in doing so, is the first person to record those words in writing. The word 'kaya' has never before been written. This immediately raises a question for Bobby. Does 'kaya' mean hello or yes? Does it mean both? At that moment he is the only person who knows how to read the word 'kaya' and understand its dual meanings.

Bobby uses his new writing skills to record what he sees and does, writing things such '*Fine no wailz lumpy see*' and '*Kongk gon wailz cum*' (Scott 5). At this

point, there is nothing to suggest that words are able to transcend their literal and contextual confines. For now, Bobby reads these entries literally, just as he writes them phonetically. But we know that a moment of insight is surely imminent for Bobby, and this is hinted at first by the description of Bobby as 'wishing, imagining' as he writes, and then on the following page the description of him writing '*Thar she bloze!'* and making whales appear, and then doing it 'again and again in seasons to come', as if his words share a direct connection with the world itself, and do not simply denote (Scott 5). In this scene, we are being invited to speculate on how long Bobby will be able to maintain the 'illusion that [writing] can properly mean' (de Man 1979: 202).

As if taking the cue from the pattern of Bobby's reading and writing, the mode of the mimetic holds true for the novel for the early part of the narrative. We see a slow procession of characters introduced and the settlement of King George Town begins to take shape. The theme of writing is ever-present, firstly through Bobby as he becomes literate, but continued by Dr Cross, the de-facto leader of the new colony. He records what he learns about the Noongar, noting in his letters that they are 'very friendly and often assist the settlers, several preferring European frock and trousers to the scant kangaroo skin and a good house to the cold bush' (Scott 35). In fact, the use of the framing device of Cross's letters within a broader story of Noongar self-representation only further foreshadows the narrative

realignment that is imminent. It does not, however, bring it about, not just yet. It is clear that the early sections of *Deadman* take a conservative approach to how the scene of writing is portrayed, one that does not invite an overt narrative re-alignment.

The reasons for this soon become apparent. Until we arrive at the first performance of the titular Dead Man Dance early in Part II, the text has worked hard to maintain what de Man would call the 'mimetic mode' (1979: 212), or what the historian C. Behan McCullagh described as the sense in which 'words are commonly and regularly associated with things in the world, things which they refer to or bring about' (143). The sense, that is, of language having an immediate graspable meaning. The paradoxical nature of language, its literal/figural dichotomy, is always present, but the text until Part II encourages a straight-forward reading in the service of its larger project of destabilising precisely this supposedly stable meaning, and, in the process, forcing us to recognise the divergent nature of fiction and historiography.

By the time we arrive at the Dead Man Dance a literal reading has become entirely untenable. The description of the dance reveals the tension at the centre of the narrative:

> You paint yourself in red ochre, neck to waist and wrist, and leave your hands all bare. White ochre on your thighs, but keep your calves and feet

> bare, like boots, see? A big cross of white clay painted on every chest. Each man takes a stick about the size of an emu's leg, and sometimes you wave it about, sometimes carry it on your shoulder as you walk up and down very stiffly (Scott 2010: 68).

The dance, as we see, is not merely a celebration or an expression of cultural ties or an expression of tribal belonging: it is a form of history, a particular Noongar history, recording the arrival of the British at King George Town. The dancers re-enact marching drills performed by the redcoats, detailing the appearance and actions of the British and the Noongar response to them.

As de Man explained it, there are moments of immense opportunity in a text where narratives can be 'folded back upon themselves and become self-referential' (1979: 205). This is precisely one such moment, as we come to understand that the Dead Man Dance is mirroring Scott's own attempts at organising the past. His novel reimagines the material of the archives, much in the same way that the Noongar reimagined the soldier's drill. At this point, the text – even if only momentarily – moves beyond merely pointing to a real historical referent and begins to reflect on the gap that enables fiction to exist: the semiotic gap between figure and referent. In doing so, it removes the supposedly solid ground of history out from under itself. The result of this is that the 'pattern of referential authority' shifts 'from a representational mimetic mode […] to a deconstructive diegesis', as

the reader is made suddenly aware of the structuring allegory at the centre of the novel (de Man 1979: 212).

Where previously the text had an uncomplicated, almost historiographic pretension, it now draws attention to the impossibility of reading fiction solely in that way. The original source for the Dead Man Dance is an account from the journal of Matthew Flinders, recorded in 1801 in Princess Royal Harbour, in which Flinders notes that the ‘red coats and white-crossed belts were greatly admired’ by the Noongar, and that the marching of the red-coats was met with excitement and ‘wild gestures and vociferation’ (quoted in Mead 146). At one point, an ‘old man placed himself at the end of the rank, with short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines their muskets’ (quoted in Mead 146). It is a act that pre-figures the Dead Man Dance that Bobby Wabalanginy and his people perform, and this context is made clear in the author's note: ‘The military drill Matthew Flinders’ marines performed on the beach was transformed into a Noongar dance’ (Scott 399). Just as the drill was transformed by the Noongar into a dance with many layers of meaning, so too is Flinders’ journal transformed by Scott into something much more than a simple historiographic account. By providing this context in the author's note, Scott is able to signpost the moment of figural re-organisation in the text. We see for the first time the allegory of the Dead Man Dance as a proxy for Scott’s own jaunt through the archives.

But as the literary critic Philip Mead has noted, ‘Scott is not about to trust the archive, not even in its powerfully originary form of Flinder’s journal’ (149). So while the novel takes as a starting point the events recorded by Flinders, the reconfiguration quickly moves the text beyond the historical account of the dance. From this point onwards, it articulates the dilemma faced by a Noongar writer in the 21st century trying to speak truthfully about the past. Scott’s ‘imagination works with a kind of alternating documentary current’, testing one form of historical representation against another, journal against dance, oral against written, fiction against historiography (Mead 149). In conjunction with these forms of representation, the narrative sets up another alternating current between the literal and the figural, as it draws in primary historical sources, like the journal, and secondary historiographic works, and transforms them into allegories of creative representation. The tension generated by the second and third degrees of allegory, as they question the possibility of reading the first degree of the literal, is present now in every aspect of the text as we progress.

So if our responses were conditional upon the previous regime of the mimetic before this point, after it our responses must take into account the reconfigured vectors of the narrative and search for those moments in the text that seem to point towards an imagined topography, rather than an historical one. We can no longer view these scenes as naïve realist representations of an historical

time and place; instead, they seem to confirm our inability to directly access the past as it was, reminding us of their status as textual representations drawing on other representations, repeating each other endlessly. De Man describes the effect this way:

> The very statement by which we assert that the narrative is rooted in reality can be an unreliable quotation; the very document, the manuscript, produced in evidence may point back, not to an actual event, but to an endless chain of quotations reaching as far back as the ultimate transcendental signified God, none of which can lay claim to referential authority (1979: 204).

Under this scenario, *Deadman*, while being deeply concerned with the actuality of past events as we see in the author's note, nonetheless resists the Western mode of history as the ‘true’ by embarking on a series of exchanges, promoting an extra-textual narrative, a narrative of deconstruction, that allegorises the referential frailty of historical representation, thereby unsettling the possibility of reading it straight-forwardly.

This pattern — transcendent allegorical moments revealing the tension in the text as it struggles to control the mode of its own rhetoric — becomes more pronounced as the narrative proceeds. One such moment, perhaps the most important moment, comes when one of the elders of Bobby’s tribe, Wunyeran,

performs a dance that appears to share the characteristics of a journal (Scott 113). Dr Cross observes the dance from a distance:

> It was hard to be sure, the distance and all, but it seemed he was miming someone writing. There was the sharpening of the quill, the dipping in ink, the turning of a heavy page. He mimed what seemed to be a hunt. It was not a silent mime — clearly he was enacting what he spoke — but Cross could not hear the words and if he had he would still not have understood them […] Wunyeran's performance of the journey was structured in the way of an expedition journal. Or was Cross imagining things? (Scott 113).

Cross is interpreting the events by giving them a form that he is familiar with, the form of the journal, but he knows that 'sometimes his perception of the world became very unstable', and that therefore his interpretation is suspect and he may well be 'imagining things' (Scott 113). How does this fit within the wider established pattern?

Frederic Jameson described a process peculiar to postmodern society, 'one whose putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles', whereby the 'past as "referent" finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts' (18). What we see here with Cross and Wunyeran is the unfolding of this bracketing, as first Wunyeran creates a performance text, and then Cross, observing it through his own cultural filter, brackets that text within

another — his own interpretation of it as an expedition journal. The journey through Noongar country, the actual events to which each man is vainly attempting to refer, is slowly effaced as each text adds further brackets, further layers of referable meaning, to the original action of the journey. In Jameson's view, the past is lost under the weight of historicism that follows it, and accessing the past was never, we now discover, a 'matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content' but instead a matter of approaching 'the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness"' (19).

Jameson's fellow postmodernist Linda Hutcheon built on this aspect of his thought by pointing out that, rather than assimilating the actual historical data in order to add a sheen of verifiability to a text, in the genre she calls 'historiographic metafiction' the 'process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded' (114). By bringing this process to the foreground, 'we see both the collecting [of historical data] and the attempts to make narrative order' out of that data (Hutcheon 114). The net result is that the 'reality of the past' is confirmed, but that its reality, paradoxically, is only accessible to us through textual sources, and is thus, in a very real sense, unknowable (Hutcheon 114). The 'pastness' of the past can only be conveyed through stylistic choices, as it were.

To understand how the text of *Deadman* foregrounds the assimilating process that Hutcheon describes we need only to consider the historical sources

listed in the author's note. The source for the Wunyeran/Cross passage is the record left behind by ‘an observant colonial diarist’, the records of a ‘verbal account by another Noongar guide’ that ‘exploited structural characteristics of the “expedition journal”, a popular literary form of the time’ (Scott 399). But of course this scene of referential bracketing — Wunyeran’s miming interpretation of the original journey, followed by Cross’ attempts at locating that data within the identifiable narrative framework of the journal — is simply further bracketing for the historical data in the author's note. As links in the chain of signification are added, we left in doubt as to what the scene with Cross and Wunyeran was in fact referring. Was it intended to denote the colonist’s diary? Or was it referring beyond that to the past event itself, of which we have only the diary to inform us? The bracketing makes it impossible to know.

In addition to this, there is the further degree of allegory that is transposed into, and framed within, the passage. For, just as Cross observes Wunyeran’s performance and re-imagines it in the form of a journal, so, too, is Scott taking the archival material left behind by settlers and re-imagining it, this time in the form of a novel. His transformation of the material directly mirrors what both Cross and Wunyeran are doing, and what the colonial diarist did before them — assimilating historical data into their respective texts, conscious that the process of assimilation itself, rather than the data, is what is at issue. Before the turning point, this scene

would not present as self-evidently as it does. But given the narrative re-alignment that has occurred around the theme of representing the past, the implications of this scene now arrive with clarity. We cannot be certain what the final point of reference is intended to be but each possible referent has strong claims to being the intended signified.

Paul de Man describes this phenomenon in literature as the ‘self-reflecting mirror effect’ (1971: 17). It is the effect ‘by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of that sign’ (de Man 1971: 17). In other words, the text is both explicitly and implicitly calling attention to itself as a construction, as a product of words and ideas, in ways that historiography does not. While de Man’s point is a fairly obvious one — that fiction creates an imaginary topography for itself — nevertheless in *Deadman* we see it expressed in such vivid contrast to the normal mimetic pretensions that it is made to seem fresh and insightful all over again. Somewhat polemically, de Man adds to his formulation that it is always ‘against the explicit assertion of the writer that readers degrade the fiction by confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave’ (1971: 17). Scott’s novel hedges its bets in this regard, inviting us to read it as a fiction, yet purposefully ‘confusing it with a reality from which it has forever taken leave’ by drawing in

historical elements from nineteenth-century Albany and playing them off against a range of fictional referents (de Man 1971: 17).

At this point that we see the referential anxiety on display in the text emerge most fully into view. There is always a tension between reading *Deadman* as a historiographic account of the past, and reading it as a narration of its own rejection of that reading. In other words, it attempts to maintain a 'grounding in socio-historical reference, or at least supplement it' while at the same time 'taking seriously the epistemological uncertainties that deconstruction has so rigorously articulated' (Syrotinski 4). It is not surprising that an author such as Kim Scott, a Noongar man writing Noongar history, should strive for a historically and empirically grounded narrative. But in searching for that grounding, '[e]pistemological, political and ethical tensions almost inevitably come to the surface' as the problematics of figural language complicate the search and referential tension begins to develop, often taking the 'form of questions of reading, or of misreading, and of the inevitability of misreading' (Syrotinski 4). Whereas for some novels, the possibility of denomination is just an 'aberrant trope that conceals the radical figurality of language', in the case of *Deadman* denomination is treated as an ethical requirement irresolvably bound up with truth telling (de Man 1979: 202). The tension that results from this competition is the primary deconstructive force in the novel.

But this sense of a referential tension also reveals something else. It shows how the mechanisms of figural language can be used to expose the sometimes-indeterminate difference between fiction and historical truth in colonial contexts. Scott has produced a narrative of the Noongar people that explores the very process by which they were created through representation, first by the reams of archival evidence, and then later by secondary historiography — not only for the consumption of a settler-Australian audience, but for Noongar consumption as well. It is a kind of counter-narrative, in the regular post-colonial sense and also, importantly, in the deconstructive sense. It is deconstruction as a form of decolonisation. Through its treatment of the problematics of reference, *Deadman* complicates the 'simple notion that counter-history merely involves making the subaltern the subject of their own histories' — rather, we see that when working at the limits of history, this kind of approach can show how 'subaltern history will always mark those points where conventional historiography shields its own cognitive failures' (Young 203-4). For Scott, sometimes those cognitive failures are revealed by 'think[ing] differently' through fiction, in a way that is not 'allowed by the sort of documents available in the archives' (Scott et al. 53-4).

This also has implications for the way we think about Noongar representation. For in working through the second- and third-degree narratives we are forced to confront the preposterousness of ever being able to truly describe or

name the past. The moment we attempt it, the text splits, unwanted referents are dragged in, and the potential for clarity is destroyed. Fittingly, this is something very like the process that the historiography of the Noongar people, and perhaps of all Aboriginal peoples, has gone through since settlement. In a world where representation is 'not just dominated by history, but dominated by history as knowledge already known, as the same old thing – as the dominant idea of our time', the opportunity to reveal its cognitive failures surely needs to be seen as part of the broader project of decolonisation (Davies 1). Scott's book reminds us that, in terms of the text's desire to refer beyond itself to the past, we must recognise that 'the referential sense is also a figure, a trope', in the same way that allegorical meaning is a trope, which inevitably means we 'always have one more trope than we want' (Tambling 156). The outcome of excess or unwanted tropes, as we have seen, is to interrupt the otherwise stable meanings that a literal reading is often assumed to produce. In this case, it interrupts the historiographic attempts at containing or explaining Noongar Aboriginality.

By considering the ways in which *Deadman* conceives of its connections to the empirical, particularly with regards to the kinds of connection we associate with historical discourse, we can see how it occupies the contested middle ground between the figural and the literal. The relationship Kim Scott's novel shares with history is more interruptive than dialectical, and it generates these interruptions by

drawing on extra-textual sources for its most important self-reflexive moments, thereby guiding us towards the allegorical dimensions built into the very fabric of the novel, and indeed into the fabric of language. The deconstructive tension that it displays so openly is a signal that it has other things on its mind, foremost of which is to test the link between the word and the world, the figure and the referent. In doing so it focuses attention on the broader concerns it has with what it means to mean, and what it means to represent.

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